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FLYOVER FICTION

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Lamb Bright Saviors

ROBERT VIVIAN

University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London

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Set in Minion and VAG Rounded
by Bob Reitz.

This book is for beloved T,
the girl from Big Rapids —
And for William Palmer and Carol Bender,
who have taught me more than they will ever know.

When the hearer
has become thirsty and craving,
the preacher,
even if he be as good as dead,
becomes eloquent.

RUMI

As long as we remain sheep,
we overcome.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Contents

Noon Song	1
Mady	5
Oly	14
Godsick	24
Yarborough	31
Mady	39
Munoz	47
Twilight Song	64
Marian	68
Oly	87
Gus	98
Mady	109
Yarborough	121
Gus	133
Yarborough	152
Munoz	158
Evensong	171
Mady	174

Lamb Bright Saviors

Noon Song

The preacher came up the dusty road followed by the girl pulling the wagon stacked with bibles. The preacher walked ahead of her, working it from side to side like he was addressing the last assembly on earth, staying ahead of the girl, who struggled to keep up. From far away the heat made their foot-steps tremble on the dusty road like candle flames, caesura and counter-caesura in the moth-betoken fluttering of the wayfarer world. The girl stopped once or twice to catch her breath but the preacher kept striding ahead on long scissor legs toward the kingdom of God. He was shouting about salvation into the clear bright air above his head, but the words got lost in the ransack cadence of his apocalyptic cries. The bibles looked like a pyramid of gold-green bars stacked by an Egyptian slave. They were stacked neatly and covered with taut mosquito netting in the beat-up wagon, like newly minted gold.

The girl leaned into her load with the leather headband

strapped across her forehead, her arms free and swinging in the determined tug of perpetual incline all the way to the horizon. The wheels creaked and groaned when the girl made the extra push to make up lost ground, but she was still a good twenty feet behind and fading. In a few miles he'd be in another county and she'd be left behind. Then the race to nowhere would be over, and he'd be victorious over the drop-dead miles. The girl had black renegade hair all the way down her back and was around thirteen years old, though she didn't know her date of birth or town of origin. Her white summer dress was torn at the hem and she wore pink flip-flops that made the sound of cards in the spokes of a bicycle tire dealing out one bad card after another.

The preacher wore an old-time getup straight out of a traveling circus, replete with frilly mustard-colored vest, silver watch chain, and cream-colored tie, his straw hat slightly askew on his head, with dark moons of sweat under his arms. Flies gathered there to wash the TV screens of their eyes. The preacher was six-foot-seven with a wreath of white hair around his bald pate to match his albino face as the searing Nebraska heat flame-broiled Jesus inside his mouth. His coat and pants were yellow all the way down to his lemon wingtip shoes as he went banana sailing into the sun. He was preaching it up for the record books, his arms a flurry of restless birds for the sake of invisible deaf folks, like he was talking to a congregation in the dream church of his mind. His teeth flashed and snapped before the girl like a thousand shiny doors. Somehow four or five crisp bills of each denomination got loose from his waving arms and sputtered, fan-like, in the air, drifting all the way back to the girl, who did nothing to retrieve them.

No way to tell where they were going or where they had been, but it must have encompassed the world: the preacher and the girl were far out on the sea of a lonely country road where hardly a soul deigned to pass. Ditch weed and corn rows watched them go by in a gauntlet of vegetable eyes. He didn't look back at the girl to see how she was doing. His neglect was monstrous and profound, like ignoring her was central to his call.

Before long the preacher pulled up in the middle of the road, whipped out his johnson, and started pissing on the ground without ceremony while keeping up his rhapsody about all of creation. What you could hear of it was ecstatic and full of oaths, as close to babble as praise will ever get. He could have been leaning over a pulpit with crazed yellow fingernails. Turning his head from side to side he ordained both east and west to get the message out, though what the message was had never been established. Meanwhile his member dangled in front of him like scandalous bruised tackle in the plumb harvest kingdom of the uncircumcised. The girl almost caught up with him to see this baleful sight for herself before he shook off a jibber or two and put his joint back in, ready to step it up again with renewed vigor.

But he didn't get very far.

Ten feet into it he started to stagger back and forth like a drunk man and ended up doing a fey pirouette before falling face-down in the road, his hat tumbling off his head. The girl took off her headband and raced over to him, leaning down over him as her dress ballooned up with air. She put her head against his chest to listen to his heartbeat, rose up again, flipped her hair back, and settled in to listen again to his quiet rib cage of dread.

They stayed like that for a long time, a tableau of fallen travelers locked together. When she looked up her face was full of anguish, grieving for the one who had so recently been in high fever mode for the Lord. She lay back across him and covered him with her sobs, quaking with grief. Some rough-looking men fishing down by the reservoir saw what had happened and came to investigate, eventually carrying the preacher to a blind lady's house who lived about a mile away before some thunderheads rolled in and it started to pour. Though what happened after that would shake them all up forever.